

**MARVEL**

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COMICS GROUP



FROM  
THE  
X-MEN

**STORM™ AND ILLYANA™**

# MANGIK

**#4 IN A FOUR-ISSUE LIMITED SERIES**

60¢

4

MAR

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APPROVED  
BY THE  
COMICS  
CODE  
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ORORO CAME TO BELASCO'S  
CITADEL TO RESCUE ME.

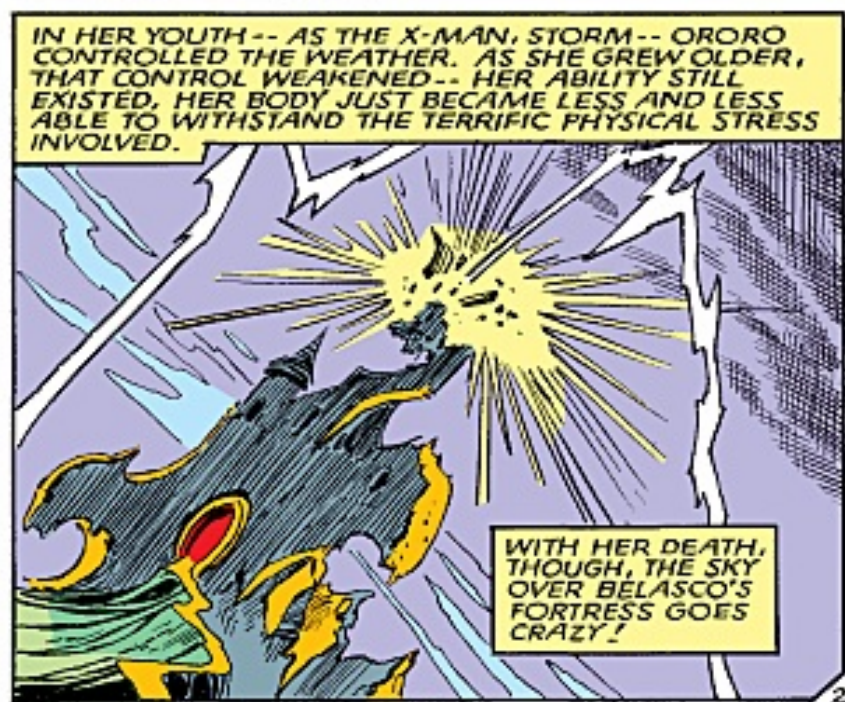
IT WAS A MAD THING TO  
DO -- IN HER PRIME, SHE  
WAS NO MATCH FOR HIM --  
DOOMED FROM THE START.  
I TRIED TO HELP, BUT I  
WAS TOO SLOW, TOO LATE.

CAT -- DEAREST, BEST FRIEND  
TO BOTH OF US BEFORE  
BELASCO TRANSFORMED HER  
INTO HIS DEMON PET -- STRUCK  
HER DOWN. NOW, ORORO LIES  
DYING IN MY ARMS.

CAT'S NEARBY,  
ALREADY DEAD.  
I BROKE HER NECK. BELASCO  
APPLAUDED MY STRENGTH  
AND SKILL. I WISH I'D  
SLAIN HIM INSTEAD.

I'M SO GLAD HE'S  
PLEASED WITH ME.







IT'S AS IF ORORO  
HERSELF HAD  
BECOME ONE  
WITH THE LIGHTNING,  
DOING HER UTMOST--  
THIS LAST TIME--TO  
DESTROY BELASCO  
AND ALL HIS WORKS.

HIS TOWER IS SHATTERED,  
HIS MONSTERS CRUSHED,  
BUT AS ALWAYS...

... BELASCO HIMSELF  
REMAINS UNTOUCHED.

HE ISN'T AT ALL PLEASED WITH ME.

CURSE YOU, GIRL! I'VE ENDURED  
YOUR DEFIANCE AND REBELLION  
FOR THE LAST TIME!

YOU HAD POWER BEYOND COMPREHENSION  
WITHIN YOUR GRASP, BUT INSTEAD, *ILLYANA  
RASPUTIN*, YOU SHALL KNOW NAUGHT BUT MISERY  
AND PAIN -- FROM NOW 'TIL THE END OF TIME! NO  
ONE CAN PROTECT YOU, NO ONE CAN SAVE YOU.

RUN WHERE  
YOU LIKE,  
TRAITRESS,  
HIDE AS BEST  
YOU CAN, YOU'LL  
NOT ESCAPE  
MY WRATH!

I USE MY MUTANT POWER TO SUMMON A LIGHT CIRCLE.

THE INSTANT IT  
APPEARS, ORORO  
AND I ARE...

... GONE.



...BACK TO THE GARDEN ORORO CREATED AND LOVED.

WHEN I WAS A LITTLE GIRL, BELASCO KIDNAPPED ME TO LIMBO. THE X-MEN FOLLOWED, BUT IN THE CONFUSION WE BECAME SEPARATED. I WAS LEFT BEHIND.

I DISCOVERED ANOTHER GROUP OF X-MEN, WHO'D COME HERE LONG BEFORE, FOLLOWING ANOTHER ILLYANA. SHE ESCAPED, THEY REMAINED, TRAPPED FOREVER IN THIS AWFUL PLACE.

ONE BY ONE, BELASCO HUNTED THEM DOWN, TWISTING THEIR SOULS UNTIL THEY WERE REMADE IN HIS IMAGE. ORORO WAS THE LAST.

WITHOUT HER POWER TO SHIELD IT, BELASCO ONCE MORE HOLDS SWAY. HIS REVENGE WILL BE TO MAKE THIS OASIS OF BEAUTY AND LIFE AS WARPED, AS DESOLATE, AS THE REST OF HIS DOMAIN.



AND ME AS WELL, I'LL BET, IF HE GETS THE CHANCE.

HE POSSESSED HER UTTERLY ONCE, BUT SHE OUTWITTED HIM. SHE STOLE BACK HER SOUL AND WON HER FREEDOM, BECOMING HIS GREATEST ENEMY.



FOR ALL THE GOOD IT DID HER.

THE GARDEN--WHAT'S HAPPENING?! THE WIND--BITTER COLD--ALL ORORO'S TREES AND FLOWERS ARE ROTTING BEFORE MY EYES!



I SHOULD HAVE REALIZED--THIS IS A MAGIC PLACE.

AS I THINK THAT, I FIND MYSELF WANTING TO RUN TO HIM, TO BEG HIS FORGIVENESS--READY TO PAY ANY PRICE IF ONLY HE'D TAKE ME BACK AND LOVE ME AS BEFORE.

I FEEL SO ALONE. SO AFRAID.



YOU SHOULD HAVE THOUGHT OF THAT SOONER, DISCIPLE.

SOME TRANSGRESSIONS CANNOT BE FORGIVEN.







SINCE YOU TOOK MY LIFE --

-- AND DENIED ME MY MOMENT OF TRANSFIGURATION AND GLORY AMONG THE DARK ONES-- IT IS ONLY FITTING I RETURN THE COMPLIMENT.

I CAN'T FIGHT THIS-- OR EVEN FACE IT-- AND SO I FLEE.



WAS THAT REALLY HER--

--OR SOME CONJURATION-- AN ILLUSION-- OF BELASCO'S?!

I MUSTN'T THINK OF ORORO AS THAT GHOUL. I HAVE TO REMEMBER THE WAY SHE WAS IN LIFE...



...STRONG AND GENTLE AND KIND.



ALL THE THINGS YOU ARE NOT, eh, LITTLE SISTER?

COLOSSUS!

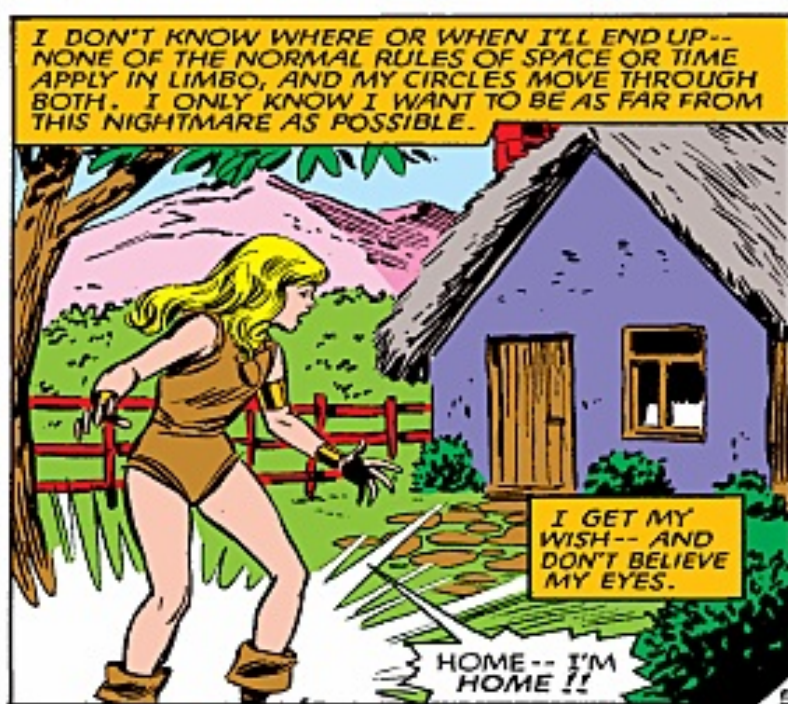
IT WAS FOR YOU WE DIED, ILLYANA--



--FOR YOU WE WERE DAMNED!

THOSE SCALES MUST BE BALANCED!

AWFUL AS SEEING ORORO WAS, THIS IS INFINITELY WORSE.



I DON'T KNOW WHERE OR WHEN I'LL END UP-- NONE OF THE NORMAL RULES OF SPACE OR TIME APPLY IN LIMBO, AND MY CIRCLES MOVE THROUGH BOTH. I ONLY KNOW I WANT TO BE AS FAR FROM THIS NIGHTMARE AS POSSIBLE.

I GET MY WISH-- AND DON'T BELIEVE MY EYES.

HOME-- I'M HOME !!



WHAT A DUNCE I AM. IT NEVER ONCE ENTERED MY HEAD THAT MY CIRCLES COULD TRANSPORT ME FROM LIMBO TO EARTH--SOMEHOW, I SENSE INSTINCTIVELY THAT THIS IS EARTH, NOT ANOTHER OF BELASCO'S MIND-TRICKS.



MAMA,  
PAPA--  
IT'S  
ILLYANA!

I COULD HAVE ESCAPED ANY-  
TIME, AND DIDN'T KNOW IT!

DID YOU HEAR,  
NIKOLAI? SHE  
SAID IT'S OUR...



... DAUGHTER?!?

I'M SO GLAD TO  
BE HOME-- YOU  
LOOK WONDERFUL,  
MAMA-- I FEARED  
I'D NEVER SEE  
YOU AGAIN!



HOW'S  
PAPA,  
IS HE  
WELL?

WHAT'S THE MEANING OF THIS,  
GIRL? WHY ARE YOU PLAYING  
SUCH A CRUEL JOKE?!



WHAT'S ALL THE COMMOTION?

PAPA!

I BEG  
YOUR  
PARDON!

IT'S ME,  
ILLYANA!



MY  
DAUGHTER?!  
IMPOSSIBLE!

OUR ILLYANA IS A BABY.  
YOU'RE A YOUNG WOMAN,  
ALMOST FULLY GROWN.

STOP TALKING  
NONSENSE AND GO  
HOME TO YOUR REAL  
PARENTS.



NO DECENT CHILD WOULD  
TRAIPISE ABOUT IN SUCH A  
COSTUME! WHAT ARE YOU  
REALLY, SOME RUNAWAY  
WOLF-GIRL FROM  
THE CIRCUS?!

LEAVE US BE!  
YOU'RE NOT  
WELCOME  
HERE.



WAIT! LISTEN TO ME--

-- PLEASE!





I SHOULD HAVE REALIZED SOONER-- I CAN'T GO HOME, EVER AGAIN, NOT REALLY.



TO THEM, I'M A SIX YEAR OLD, LIVING WITH HER BIG BROTHER IN AMERICA. BUT THOSE DAYS ARE ALMOST HALF MY LIFETIME AGO.



HOW DO I TELL THEM THEIR BELOVED SNOW-FLAKE HAS BECOME BOTH MUTANT AND APPRENTICE SORCERESS. I CAN HARDLY BELIEVE IT MYSELF.

THAT, DEAR LITTLE ILLYANA...



HMNH?

...IS THE LEAST OF YOUR TROUBLES.



YOU FAINTED?

TSK, TSK, TSK-- I THOUGHT YOU WERE MADE OF STERNER STUFF.



THAT'S THE SPIRIT, ILLYANA-- OPEN THOSE LOVELY EYES. I WANT YOU AWAKE FOR THIS. THERE'S NO AMUSEMENT IN PUNISHING SOMEONE WHO CAN'T FEEL IT.



HELLO, BELASCO.



YOU'RE FAR TOO CALM, CONSIDERING WHAT'S IN STORE FOR YOU.

COLOSSUS, STRETCH YOUR SISTER'S ARMS A BIT. I WANT TO HEAR HER SCREAM.

I DO, UNTIL MY THROAT CRACKS.



BELASCO LOVES EVERY MINUTE.

THIS MOMENT COULD HAVE BEEN AS PLEASURABLE FOR YOU AS FOR ME, ILLYANA.



I THOUGHT I HURT BEFORE-- BELASCO TEACHES ME I DON'T KNOW THE MEANING OF THE WORD.



I WANT TO FIGHT. AND I WANT JUST AS MUCH TO GIVE IN.



THERE'S A PART OF ME THAT WILL ALWAYS ANSWER HIS CALL ...



... THAT WANTS THE DEMONIC POWER HE OFFERS.



WITH EACH BLOODSTONE CEREMONY, THAT PART GROWS.





THE STONES ARE FORMED OF MY ESSENCE, AND WHEN ALL FIVE ARE IN THEIR PROPER PLACES, I'LL BECOME THE ELDRITCH GATE THROUGH WHICH BELASCO'S GODS WILL ENTER OUR DIMENSION...

...TO SEIZE IT FOR THEIR OWN.

YOU MUST BE TAUGHT A LESSON, ILLYANA.

YOU MUST LEARN-- AS YOUR PRECIOUS X-MEN DID, TO THEIR SORROW-- WHO IS MASTER OF LIMBO.

I LEAVE YOU TO FEND FOR YOURSELF IN THIS WILDERNESS. MY SPELLS WILL DENY YOU THE USE OF YOUR MUTANT TELEPORTING TALENT, YOU'LL NOT USE YOUR LIGHT CIRCLES TO ESCAPE.

YOU MAY STARVE, BE WRACKED BY LOATHSOME PLAGUES, RAVAGED BY WILD BEASTS-- BUT YOU WILL NOT DIE. WHEN I HAVE NEED OF YOU...

...A SUMMONS WILL BRING YOU TO MY SIDE.

I WILL TAKE FROM YOU WHATEVER I PLEASE--

-- YOU CANNOT PREVENT IT.

EVENITUALLY, OF COURSE, YOU WILL NOT WANT TO.

THEN, PERHAPS, IF YOU ASK NICELY...

...I MAY FORGIVE.

WITH BELASCO'S DEPARTURE, THE ENCHANTMENTS REANIMATING THE X-MEN'S BODIES VANISH AS WELL...

...AND THE GHOULS CRUMBLE INTO DUST.



WHEN AT LAST I WAKE, MY TEARS ARE FROZEN TO MY FACE.

IT'S AN EFFORT TO MOVE, ALL I WANT TO DO IS SLEEP.

IN MY IMAGINATION, I SEE MYSELF-- A SCARECROW OF ICE, REDUCED TO SKIN AND BONES, MORE HORRIBLE THAN BELASCO'S GHOULS...

... BECAUSE I'LL STILL BE ALIVE...

...SO HUNGRY THAT, BY THEN, I'D EAT MY OWN FLESH.

BUT BELASCO'S MADE A MISTAKE.

HE FORGOT HOW STUBBORN I AM.

ORORO'S DACHA-- LEVELED! I HAVE TO FIND SHELTER-- AND QUICKLY-- MY FUR LEOTARD'S NO PROTECTION AGAINST THIS BLIZZARD.

AS IF TO UNDERSCORE THE POINT-- AND MY HELPLESSNESS--

--A GUST OF WIND--

...SENDS ME CRASHING INTO THE MASSIVE OAK THAT WAS THE CENTERPIECE OF ORORO'S GARDEN.

THE ACORN WAS LIFE, PURE AND SIMPLE, UNMARRED BY LIMBO'S PRIMAL CORRUPTION.

ORORO'S MAGIC FLOWS SO STRONGLY THROUGH THE OAK THAT BELASCO COULDN'T SWEEP IT AWAY, LIKE HE DID EVERYTHING ELSE.

THE TREE MUST DIE NATURALLY, WORN DOWN BY THE ELEMENTS THAT ONCE NURTURED IT.

IT'S CENTURIES OLD, GROWN FROM AN ACORN THAT WAS ITSELF CREATED BY THE FIRST SPELL ORORO SUCCESSFULLY CAST AFTER HER ESCAPE FROM BELASCO.



ITS TRUNK IS AS BROAD AS A HOUSE. I CAN USE IT FOR A WINDBREAK, BUT THEN WHAT? DO I STAY LIKE THIS FOREVER?

I WAS BELASCO'S APPRENTICE-- AND BEFORE THEN, ORORO'S AS WELL. PERHAPS I CAN TAP INTO THE OAK, DRAW SUSTENANCE FROM ITS NATURAL LIFE FORCE.

I EXTEND MY AWARENESS AS ORORO TAUGHT ME, BECOMING ONE WITH THE ANCIENT TREE-- RESISTING THE TEMPTATION TO PLAY WITH ITS ESSENCE, TO TRY TO MAKE THE OAK SOMETHING IT ISN'T--

-- AND CAST A PENTAGRAM OF SILVER FIRE AROUND US BOTH.

I'M SHAKING WHEN IT'S DONE--FROM THE EFFORT AND FROM FEAR.

THE BELASCO SIDE OF ME IS STRONGER THAN I THOUGHT.

I MEAN TO FOLLOW ORORO'S LEAD.

I TAKE A PORTION OF MY OWN LIFE FORCE, MANIFESTING IT AS PURE ENERGY...

... AND MIX IT WITH THE NATURAL ELEMENTS AROUND ME...

I DID THIS ONCE BEFORE\* BUT THAT ACORN ONLY LOOKED PERFECT; INSIDE, IT WAS ROTTEN TO THE CORE.

LIKE ME.

THIS ONE IS NO DIFFERENT.

...TO FORM AN ACORN.

\* LAST ISSUE -- 6.



DAYS PASS-- WITHOUT CHANGE,  
WITHOUT END. I'VE NO IDEA  
HOW MANY.

I GROW A HEAD TALLER AND BECOME  
AS HARD AS MY WILDERNESS.

FOR AS FAR AS THE EYE CAN SEE, ALL IS  
DESOLATION-- NOTHING BUT ICE AND  
SNOW, UNMARKED BY ANY LIVING THING,  
SAVE FOR ME AND THE OAK.

AND SOON, THE OAK WILL BE NO MORE.

EACH TIME I DRAW ON YOUR  
STRENGTH, OLD FRIEND, FOR  
SUSTENANCE OR SPELLS, I  
HASTEN YOUR END. NOW  
YOU'VE SO LITTLE LEFT  
TO GIVE.

FORGIVE ME.

I NEVER MEAN TO  
BRING DOOM AND  
DESTRUCTION TO  
THOSE I CARE FOR,  
BUT I ALWAYS DO.

THERE'S NO WIND OR SNOW THIS  
MORNING, I TAKE THAT AS A FAVOR-  
ABLE OMEN. PERHAPS THIS TIME,  
I'LL BE SUCCESSFUL.

YOU WERE SO  
BEAUTIFUL WHEN  
I FIRST SAW YOU,  
YOUR MAJESTY  
TOOK MY  
BREATH AWAY.

THE OAK'S POWER RUSHES THROUGH ME  
LIKE A FLOOD-- WARM AND COMFORTING,  
MAKING ME GLOW WITH STRENGTH AND  
VITALITY.

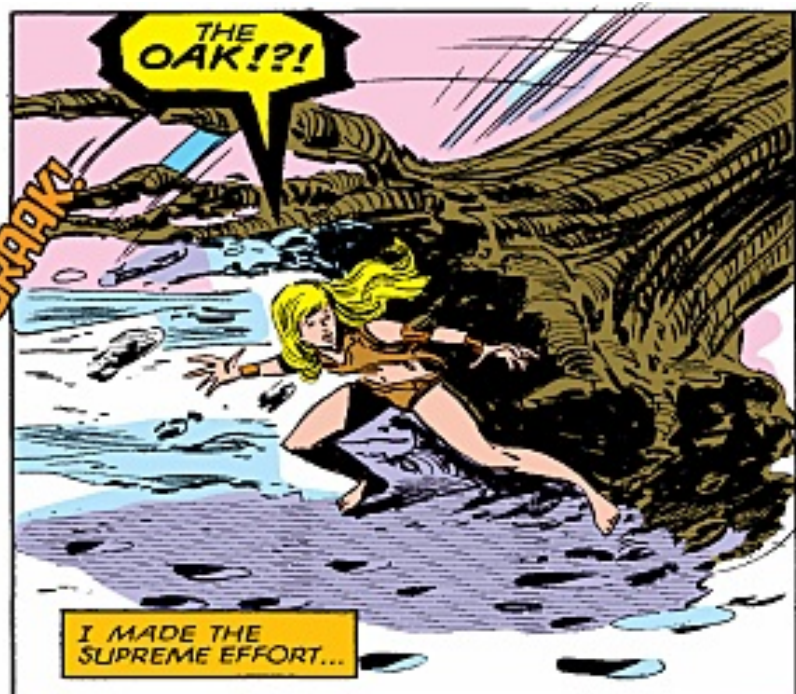
I CAST MY  
PENTAGRAM...

... CONJURE  
MY ACORN.

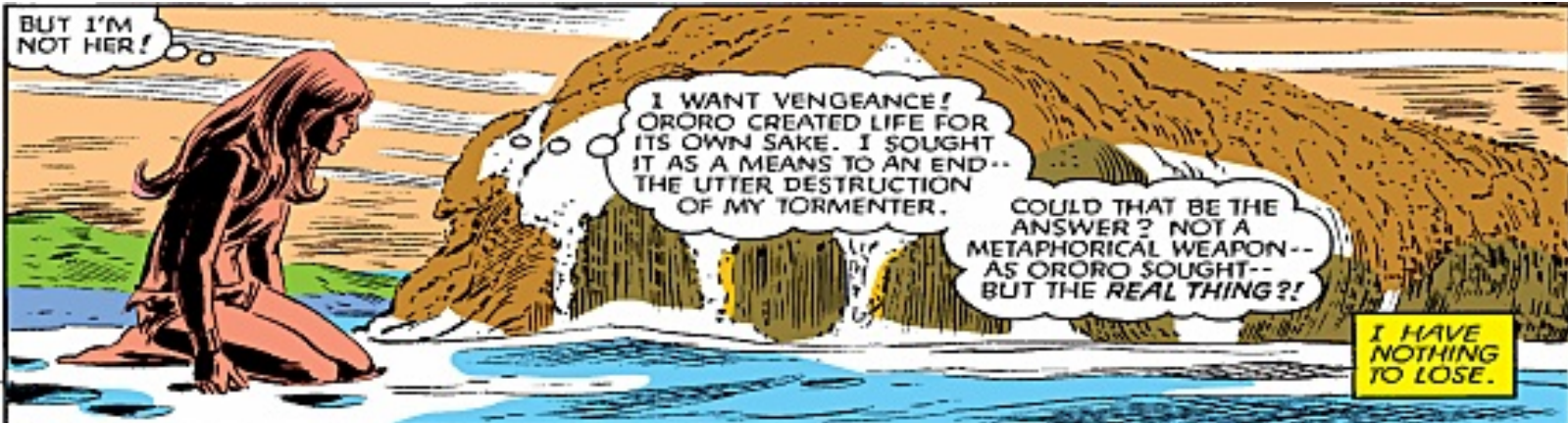
I HAVE SUCH  
HIGH HOPES.

I SHOULD  
HAVE KNOWN  
BETTER.









BUT I'M NOT HER!

I WANT VENGEANCE! ORORO CREATED LIFE FOR ITS OWN SAKE. I SOUGHT IT AS A MEANS TO AN END-- THE UTTER DESTRUCTION OF MY TORMENTER.

COULD THAT BE THE ANSWER? NOT A METAPHORICAL WEAPON-- AS ORORO SOUGHT-- BUT THE REAL THING?!

I HAVE NOTHING TO LOSE.

I CAST MY MASTER SPELL, USING WHAT REMAINS OF THE STRENGTH I TOOK FROM THE OAK, AND ALL OF MY OWN.



AS I PLUNGE MY HAND INTO THE ENERGY SPHERE...



...AN IMAGE COMES TO MIND--



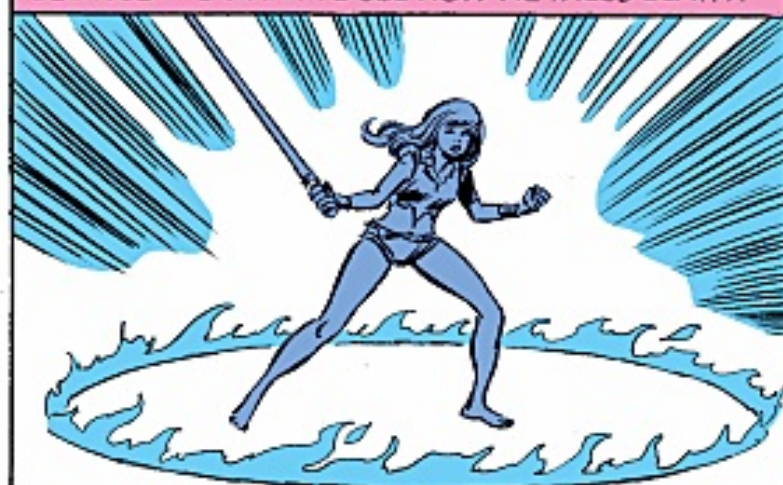
--OF A SWORD!



IT WAS SO EASY. I PROBABLY COULD HAVE DONE THIS AGES AGO!

WHY DIDN'T I COMPREHEND THIS TRUTH SOONER?! THE OAK NEED NOT HAVE SUFFERED AND DIED, I NEED NOT HAVE ENDURED EXILE IN THIS WINTERY HELL--!

I'M FLUSH WITH POWER. THE MOMENT I GRASPED THE SWORD, I FELT INVINCIBLE. I'M EAGER TO FACE BELASCO-- I WANT TO SEE HOW HE FACES DEATH.



THE ENCHANTMENTS USED TO IMPRISON ME HAVE BEEN SHATTERED-- A LIGHT CIRCLE COMES WHEN I CALL, AND WHISKS ME TO MEET MY DESTINY...



...IN BELASCO'S  
CITADEL...

SOON, VERY SOON, I WILL BE FREE OF THIS ACCURSED PRISON.  
HOW IRONIC THAT THOSE WHO CAUSED MY DOWNFALL -- THE JUNGLE  
MAN KA-ZAR AND HIS SLUT, SHANNA THE SHE-DEVIL -- WILL BE  
PART AND PARCEL OF BOTH MY RESURRECTION AND MY  
ULTIMATE TRIUMPH!

THE ELDER GODS  
SENTENCED ME TO  
LIMBO UNTIL SUCH  
TIME AS I COULD FIND  
MY OWN WAY OUT.  
ORIGINALLY, MY INTENTION  
WAS TO UTILIZE ILLYANA  
RASPUTIN AS A MEANS TO  
THAT END. BUT THIS IS SO  
MUCH MORE DELICIOUS.

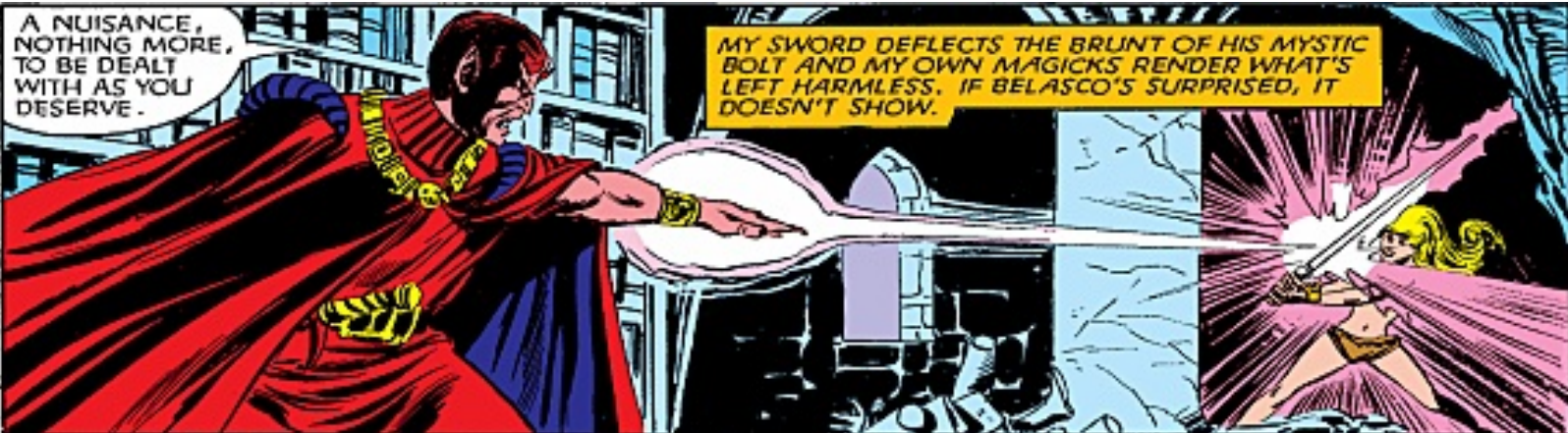
MY ENCHANTMENTS ARE  
ALREADY MANIPULATING  
THE ATLANTEAN ANDROID,  
DHERK. I NEED ONLY  
RESTORE QUEEN LEANNE  
OF LEMURIA TO A SEMBLANCE  
OF HEALTH, AND ALL  
WILL BE READY! \*

\*KA-ZAR #29 --L.

**BELASCO!**

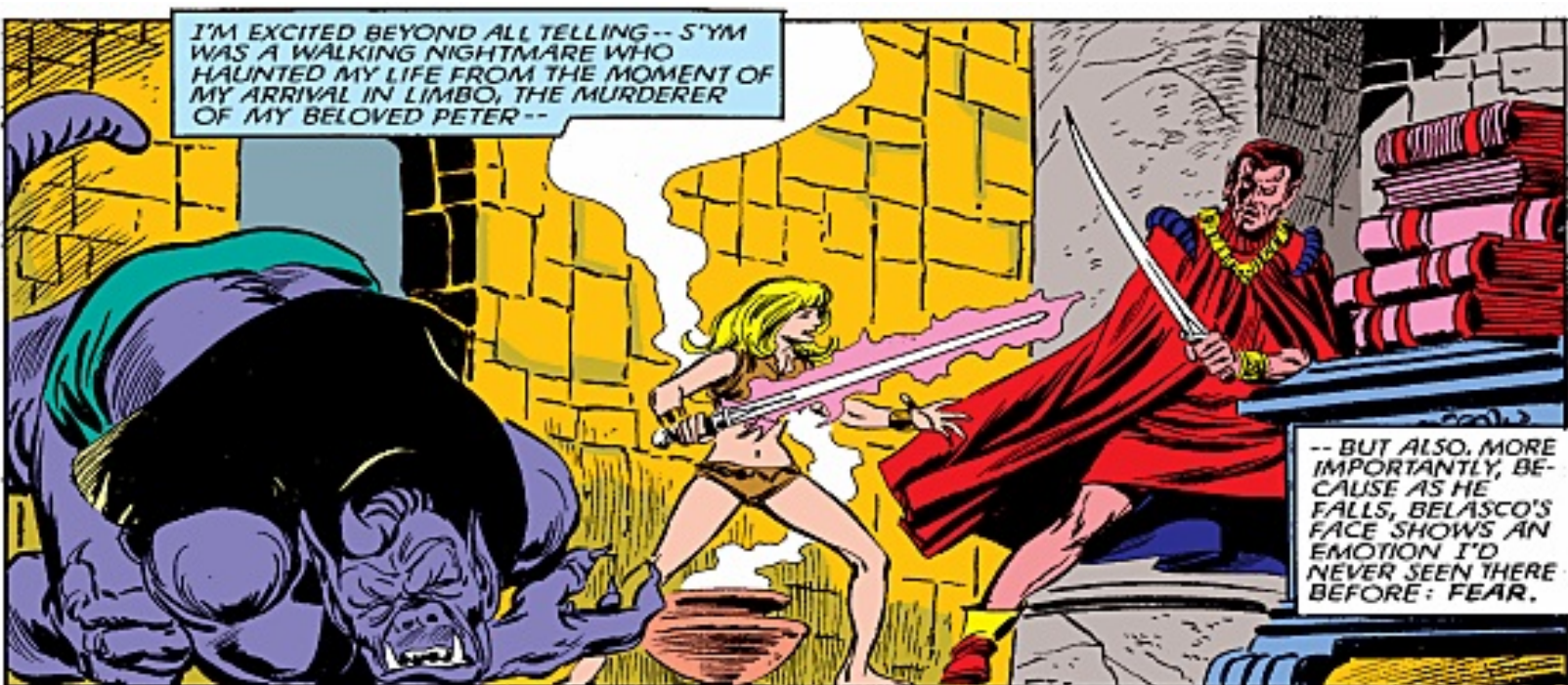






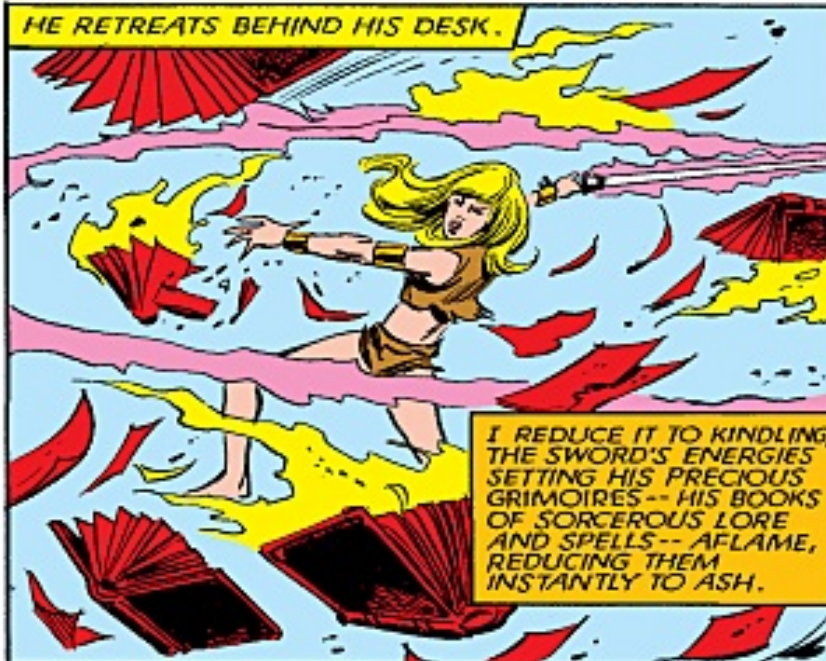


I'M EXCITED BEYOND ALL TELLING-- S'YM WAS A WALKING NIGHTMARE WHO HAUNTED MY LIFE FROM THE MOMENT OF MY ARRIVAL IN LIMBO, THE MURDERER OF MY BELOVED PETER--



-- BUT ALSO, MORE IMPORTANTLY, BECAUSE AS HE FALLS, BELASCO'S FACE SHOWS AN EMOTION I'D NEVER SEEN THERE BEFORE: FEAR.

HE RETREATS BEHIND HIS DESK.



I REDUCE IT TO KINDLING, THE SWORD'S ENERGIES SETTING HIS PRECIOUS GRIMOIRES-- HIS BOOKS OF SORCEROUS LORE AND SPELLS-- AFLAME, REDUCING THEM INSTANTLY TO ASH.

ILLYANA! CURSE YOU, DARKCHILD, HAVE YOU ANY IDEA OF WHAT YOU'VE DONE?



THAT REPRESENTS THE KNOWLEDGE OF AEONS! MUCH OF IT IS IRREPLACABLE!!

THEY WERE EVIL ...

... WITH NO MORE RIGHT TO EXIST THAN YOU!



BESIDES, THOUGH BELASCO DOESN'T KNOW IT, OVER THE YEARS, I READ EVERY BOOK IN HIS LIBRARY.

THE LEARNING ISN'T LOST, IT'S MERELY BEEN PASSED FROM ONE DEMON MAGE...



... TO ANOTHER.





SPAWN OF THE  
PIT! SHE'S  
GROWING HORNS  
AND FANGS--



--WHILE MINE ARE  
FADING AWAY!

AND WITH  
THEM, MUCH  
OF MY  
ARCAINE  
POWER!

THERE ISN'T EVEN A PRETENSE OF AN EQUAL FIGHT ANYMORE.



BELASCO'S  
HARD-PRESSED  
TO KEEP HIM-  
SELF ALIVE.  
HE HASN'T A  
PRAYER OF  
BEATING ME.

HE LOOKS POSITIVELY TERRIFIED.  
I ALMOST FEEL SORRY FOR HIM.



A TAIL--!

AND HER SKIN -- TURNING  
RED WHILE MY OWN REVERTS  
TO MORTAL HUMAN FLESH!



WHY DON'T  
YOU APPEAL  
TO YOUR  
MASTERS  
FOR AID,  
WIZARD?

SURELY THEY  
WOULDN'T ABANDON  
ONE WHO'S SERVED  
THEM SO WELL.

COULD IT BE THEY  
DON'T LIKE YOU  
ANYMORE, BELASCO--  
OR THAT THEY LIKE  
ME BETTER?





IN THE CLIMACTIC DUEL BETWEEN BELASCO AND ORORO, SHE USED HER LIGHTNING TO BURN HIM TO A CRISP.



WHAT CARE I FOR INNOCENCE LOST? I'VE NONE LEFT TO LOSE.

OR SO I THOUGHT.



STRANGE-- BOTH HANDS HOLD MY BLADE, BELASCO'S HELD BY-- MY TAIL!?!



I WEAR HORNS--

-- AS HE DID!



I'VE BECOME JUST LIKE HIM!

SO WHAT? INNER VOICES SHRIEK.

IT'S BELASCO THAT'S IMPORTANT, KILL HIM WHILE YOU HAVE THE CHANCE, ISN'T THAT WHAT YOU WANT-- KILL HIM!



DID ORORO HEAR THOSE WORDS ON THAT FATEFUL DAY? DO I NOW STAND ON THE BRINK OF THE SAME ABYSS?

STRIKE, ILLYANA, CRY MY DEMONS' VOICES, BE ONE WITH US FOREVER.



NO.

FOOL!



WITH THAT SOFT DENIAL, THE VOICES FALL SILENT. I FEEL ODDLY AT PEACE. I HAVE THE CAPACITY-- THE POWER-- TO KILL, BUT NO LONGER THE DESIRE.

MY SOULSWORD HAS BEEN FORGED IN PART FROM THE TWIN FIRES OF GRIEF AND RAGE, AND THE VIOLENCE OF THOSE EMOTIONS HAS OVERWHELMED ME WITH AN INSANE BLOODLUST THAT SENT ME HURTLING DOWN THE SAME ROAD ORORO FOLLOWED TO HER DAMNATION.



YOU RENOUNCE YOUR HERITAGE?!

NO, BELASCO. I EMBRACE IT.

POWER ABSOLUTE WAS IN YOUR GRASP?

THE PRICE WAS TOO HIGH.



PITIFUL, PATHETIC-- HUMAN-- WEAKLING!

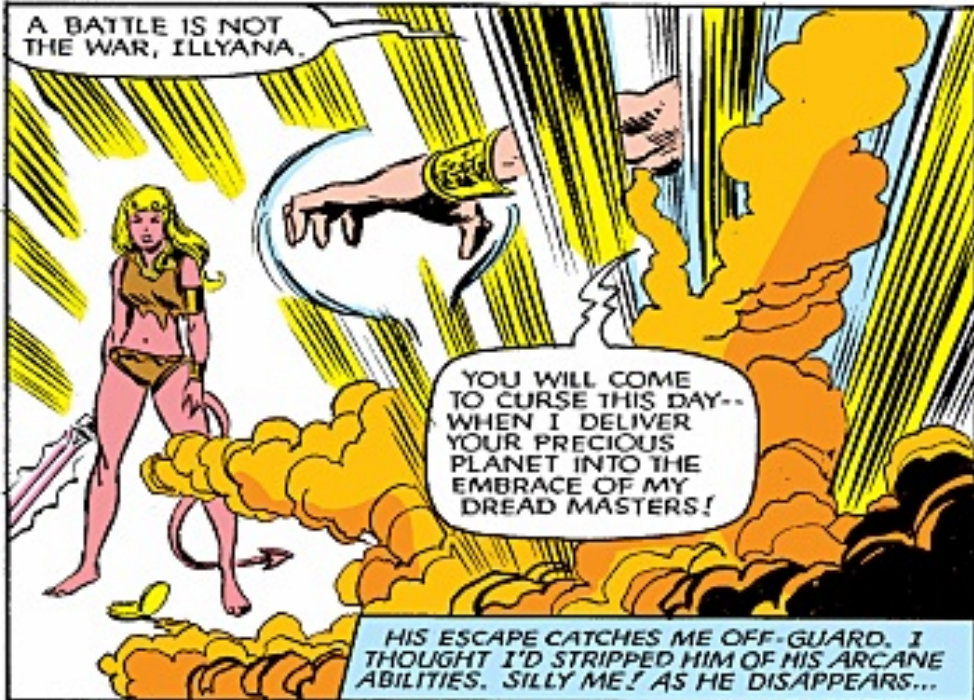
DON'T GET COCKY, BELASCO. YOU'RE ALIVE SOLELY BECAUSE I SPARED YOU. IN FAIR COMBAT, YOUR DARKCHILD BEAT YOU!

IN THAT, YOU PROVED YOUR RIGHT TO MY PLACE AS THE DARK ONES' STANDARD BEARER.



YOUR ACT OF SO-CALLED MERCY-- I SAY, COWARDICE!-- PROVES HOW MUCH THE CHILD YOU YET REMAIN.

A BATTLE IS NOT THE WAR, ILLYANA.



YOU WILL COME TO CURSE THIS DAY-- WHEN I DELIVER YOUR PRECIOUS PLANET INTO THE EMBRACE OF MY DREAD MASTERS!

HIS ESCAPE CATCHES ME OFF-GUARD. I THOUGHT I'D STRIPPED HIM OF HIS ARCAN E ABILITIES. SILLY ME! AS HE DISAPPEARS...

... I ONCE MORE BECOME MYSELF.

I'VE WON.



BUT I DON'T FEEL LIKE CHEERING.



LIFE WAS EASIER WHEN I WAS IGNORANT. THE MORE I LEARN, THE MORE I DISCOVER HOW LITTLE I TRULY KNOW. AND HOW DEADLY DANGEROUS THAT LITTLE KNOWLEDGE CAN BE.

IMAGINE BEING A PASSENGER IN A FAST-MOVING CAR. SUDDENLY, YOU'RE THE DRIVER-- ONLY YOU CAN'T SEE THE ROAD!

AND WHEN THE FOG CLEARS AND IT FINALLY COMES INTO VIEW, ALL YOU CAN SEE ARE THE POT-HOLES. YOU'RE GOING FULL SPEED, YOU CAN'T SLOW DOWN, BUT THE SLIGHTEST MISTAKE WILL FINISH YOU.

MY SWORD IS PUREST ENERGY, QUINT-ESSENTIAL MAGICKAL POWER FOCUSED-- UNBLEMISHED, UNTAINTED-- THROUGH MY SOUL. BUT FOR ALL THAT, IT IS STILL A WEAPON. ITS GENESIS IS CREATION, ITS PURPOSE DESTRUCTION.

I'M MUCH THE SAME...

... SHAPED AND TEMPERED BY TWO OPPOSING FORCES: ORORO AND BELASCO.

IF I STAY IN LIMBO, I'LL BE SAFE. I COULD HEAL THE WOUNDS BELASCO INFLICTED, MAKE ALL OF IT AS LOVELY AS ORORO'S GARDEN.

RETURNING TO EARTH MEANS, SOONER OR LATER, I'LL HAVE TO FACE BELASCO.

WHO CAN SAY WHICH OF US WILL WIN THE REMATCH?

THERE ARE THREE BLOODSTONES ALREADY IN THE MEDALLION, PARTS OF MYSELF CONSECRATED TO EVIL -- A BOND I CAN NEVER BREAK--

-- THAT'S WHY BELASCO LEFT THE MEDALLION, TO REMIND ME I'M MORE LIKE HIM THAN ORORO.

I DON'T WANT TO GO...

... BUT I DARE NOT STAY.

FOR ME, SEVEN YEARS HAVE PASSED SINCE I CAME TO LIMBO. FOR THE X-MEN, ON EARTH, BARELY SECONDS...



MY APPEARANCE THERE...

THERE SHE IS!

HELP ME-- ALL OF YOU-- I'M NOT STRONG ENOUGH!



... WILL PROVE SOMETHING OF A SURPRISE.

WE DID IT!

<ILLYANA NIKOLOVNA-- BELOVED SISTER-- WELCOME...\*>



\* TRANSLATED FROM THE RUSSIAN -- L.

<... HOME...?>

< PIOTR NIKOLIEVITCH, IS... IS THAT YOU? REALLY YOU?!?>



I USED MY POWERS TO DRESS FOR THE OCCASION. I HOPE THEY LIKE IT.

THAT WAS A YEAR AGO.\*



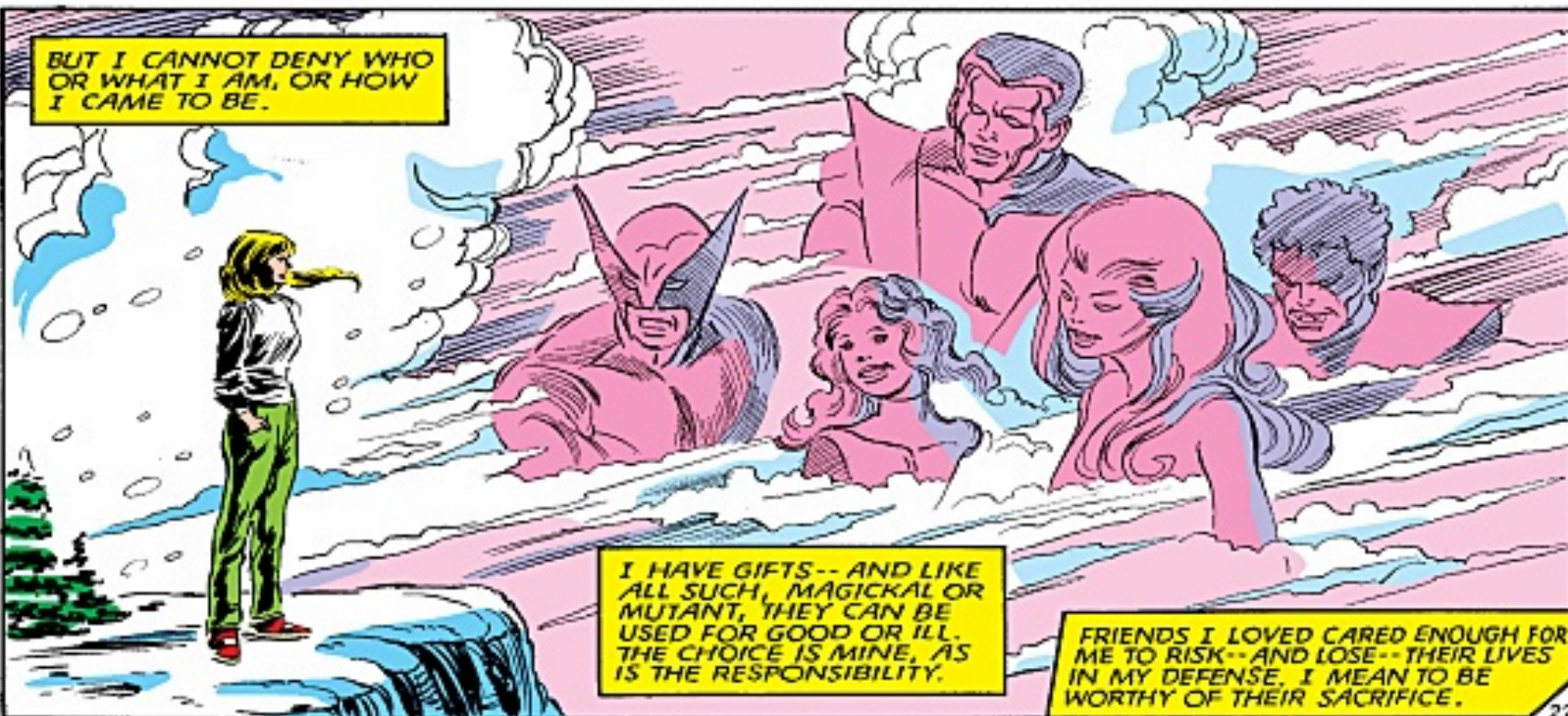
\* X-MEN #160 -- L.

I RETURNED WITH THE X-MEN TO THEIR HOME IN NEW YORK, AT PROFESSOR XAVIER'S SCHOOL. I'D ALREADY BEEN TO MY PARENTS', I SAW NO REASON TO MAKE ANOTHER TRY.



FOR AWHILE, I PUT MY PAST BEHIND ME.

BUT I CANNOT DENY WHO OR WHAT I AM, OR HOW I CAME TO BE.



I HAVE GIFTS-- AND LIKE ALL SUCH, MAGICKAL OR MUTANT, THEY CAN BE USED FOR GOOD OR ILL. THE CHOICE IS MINE, AS IS THE RESPONSIBILITY.

FRIENDS I LOVED CARED ENOUGH FOR ME TO RISK-- AND LOSE-- THEIR LIVES IN MY DEFENSE. I MEAN TO BE WORTHY OF THEIR SACRIFICE.



IN MY HEART, THEY REMAIN AS THEY WERE IN THE BEGINNING-- FREE, WHOLE, FULL OF JOY-- UNTOUCHED BY BELASCO. THEIR BODIES ARE NO MORE, BUT SO LONG AS THEIR SPIRITS SHINE BRIGHTLY IN MY MEMORY...



...THEY'LL NEVER TRULY DIE.

I'LL NEVER BE ALONE.



Hmmh?

IT'S SNOWING!

I DON'T FEEL THE COLD. I ENDURED FAR WORSE ON THE LIMBO ICEFIELD. I DON'T MIND THE STORM, EITHER. HERE, IT REPRESENTS THE NATURAL ORDER OF THINGS, NOT SOME MADMAN'S WHIM.



AS I STROLL DOWNHILL TOWARDS THE HOUSE...

... I HEAR SQUEALS OF LAUGHTER FROM THE YARD, AS THE PROFESSOR'S NOVICE STUDENTS, THE NEW MUTANTS, ARE RELEASED FROM CLASS A LITTLE EARLY.

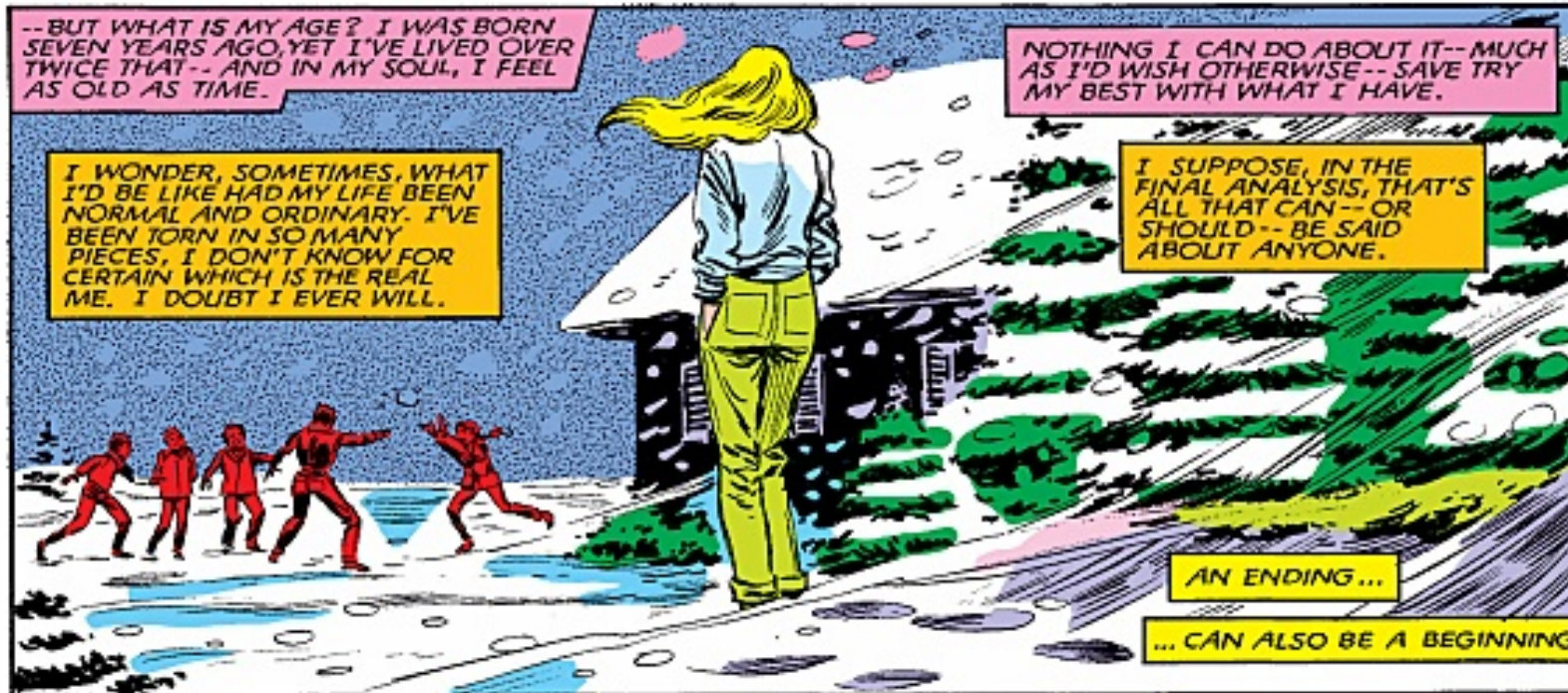
PROFESSOR XAVIER DOES HAVE A HEART. HE JUST LIKES TO KEEP IT HIDDEN.



THEY'RE MOSTLY MY AGE--

--BUT WHAT IS MY AGE? I WAS BORN SEVEN YEARS AGO, YET I'VE LIVED OVER TWICE THAT-- AND IN MY SOUL, I FEEL AS OLD AS TIME.

I WONDER, SOMETIMES, WHAT I'D BE LIKE HAD MY LIFE BEEN NORMAL AND ORDINARY. I'VE BEEN TORN IN SO MANY PIECES, I DON'T KNOW FOR CERTAIN WHICH IS THE REAL ME. I DOUBT I EVER WILL.



NOTHING I CAN DO ABOUT IT-- MUCH AS I'D WISH OTHERWISE-- SAVE TRY MY BEST WITH WHAT I HAVE.

I SUPPOSE, IN THE FINAL ANALYSIS, THAT'S ALL THAT CAN-- OR SHOULD-- BE SAID ABOUT ANYONE.

AN ENDING ...

... CAN ALSO BE A BEGINNING.